

San Diego's Best Spas

Written by Elizabeth Exline

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For most Arizonans, a summertime jaunt to San Diego is as necessary and expected as a new swimsuit. But before you assume you know everything there is to know about this classic summer escape, book an appointment at one of the following spas. Between the Moroccan Rasul and the Amazonian rubdown, we promise you'll discover a few surprises.



Travel the Silk Road

With just nine treatment rooms, the Sè Spa (619.515.3000, www.sesandiego.com) is small, but it packs a mighty punch, starting with the welcome shot of the spa's Elixir of Life. Riffing on an East Indian libation reputed to impart courage, virtue and long life, the Sè prepares its version with pomegranate juice, honey and cucumber-infused organic vodka. Teetotalers can sip on juice instead, but they're missing more than a tasty pick-me-up. The Sè was inspired in both design and treatments by the Silk Road, which wound through Asia and North Africa. A little daring on the guest's part seems like a given.

The lounge embraces this motif with Moroccan lanterns, chaise lounges and billowing, sheer drapes that separate the chaises. It's an inviting spot, and one you should have plenty of time to appreciate since the Sè bypasses the awkward locker room experience. Each treatment room has its own steam shower and ingeniously integrated amenities—a robe, slippers and toiletries are all tucked away in a closet—for a truly private experience.

The Studio Sutra takes exclusivity up a notch for couples. A Japanese soaking tub with integrated light therapy, two massage tables, a sitting area and kitchenette outfit a room no one is in a hurry to leave. And the Moroccan Rasul—a tiled space built for the spa's cleansing Arabic mud treatment—is the only one you'll find stateside.

Don't, however, pass on the Vibe Massage. Wearing headphones that pipe instrumental music to your ears only, you lie down on a table that gently pulsates in harmony with the music. Between the soothing repetitive motions of massage and the vibrating table, you end up feeling as plucked and caressed as a well-tended guitar. Follow it up with a long steam shower (in the privacy of your own treatment room, mind you), and you'll be in the right frame of mind to appreciate the striking fusion of design and treatments at the Sè. From the custom art installation at the entry, which incorporates hundreds of small teacups, to the burl wood wall treatments that the hotel owner handpicked in Pakistan, the Sè Spa never forgets its metaphor. Japan, Southeast Asia, India, North Africa—each of these regions is represented in spirit or material for a truly exotic effect.

Ride the Wave



If the Sè gazes afar for inspiration, then the Spa L'Auberge (800.245.9757, www.laubergedelmar.com) in Del Mar is its contentedly local foil, for this spa never forgets its context. And thank goodness, because it's worth remembering. You'll glimpse the ocean on your way to the 5,000-sq.-ft. spa, which opened last March, and you'll feel the sea's watery influence inside as well. Aqua walls are set off by white wainscoting, wave patterns ripple over accent walls in treatment rooms and the whole spa is sprinkled with seaside décor like surfboards, shells and glass jellyfish and octopi.

The beach-house vibe, however, does not apply to the treatment menu at Spa L'Auberge. Its signature Seaside Sojourns draw on traditions and ingredients from Asia, Polynesia, Morocco and South America, the most intriguing of which may just be the Amazonian Escapade. Despite the name, this whirl through South America's vegetative offerings is an indulgently feminine experience, starting with an exfoliation via Brazil nut oil and sea crystals. It's a deliciously exotic concoction designed to tone as it sloughs, and it paves the way for the decadent reward of a chocolate mousse wrap. (Be warned, however, that you'll feel compelled to order something chocolaty for dessert that night as a result.) The scrumptious, self-heating goo is intended to stimulate circulation—it certainly works up an appetite—but it's overwhelming in neither scent nor sensation, which makes it a delightful anomaly among spa treatments. A light moisturizer (or "modeling fluid" in L'Auberge parlance) follows, along with an invigoratingly firm massage, so you feel as revitalized as an Amazonian warrior princess.

A Sylvan Spa

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The Spa at Rancho Bernardo Inn (858.675.8471, www.ranchobernardoinn.com/spa), meanwhile, enjoys a global reputation as much as a globally-inspired treatment menu. In 2008, it achieved the coveted No. 1 spot in Condé Nast Traveler Reader's Poll of best resort spas, and one look around the lushly landscaped property will tell you why. As part of the resort's \$25 million "enhancement and expansion" in 2007, the spa acquired five new treatment casitas in an idyllic garden setting, a 2,500-sq.-ft. saline pool (replete with seven cabanas) and upgraded indoor spaces. In layman's terms, the spa feels like a cross between a grand old estate and a secret garden. Stand at the entry steps, and the spa unfolds majestically below you. The registration building sits to your right, the treatment building stands to the left and the pool and garden reside grandly in between.

But it's the inventive offerings devised by Spa Director Michelle Schlekewey that steal the spotlight. Case in point are the Spa-ing Around the World treatments, which visit Latin America, the Mediterranean, Asia and the Hawaiian Islands; and the Moonlight Spa-ing, which marries a signature massage or facial with a light dinner and a Made Fresh Daily (more on that later) enhancement. Sample the Spa—three 15-minute spa treatments with nibbles—and Spa & Lunch packages are also available on certain days this summer.

Which brings us back to Made Fresh Daily, a concept that highlights Rancho Bernardo Inn's unique gastronomic niche. These treatments go a step beyond the spa's other foodie offerings like Cocktail Pedicures and orange-peel body scrubs to feature seasonally changing ingredients that get converted onsite into spa-worthy products. This summer features avocado and rosemary as the starring ingredients in a rosemary scrub and avocado mud. The "Zesty Lemon Massage" incorporates rosemary-infused massage oil and the treatment concludes with a serving of rosemary tea. All this so you can exfoliate and massage your way to a fresher, healthier you via San Diego's finest fresh produce and herbs.

Spa of the Sea



Where The Spa at Rancho Bernardo Inn relies on the fruits of terra firma to compose its signature treatments, Hotel del Coronado's Spa at The Del (619.522.8100, www.hoteldel.com/spa) maintains a decidedly island sensibility. Yes, you will find Asian and Hawaiian massage techniques on the menu, but the Seascapes and Voyages—an assortment of massages, facials, body polishes and wraps—rely on elements no further than those right outside the door. Namely, the sea, sun and sand. Other treatments also bear the stamp of Coronado's environs, like the Vitamin Sea facial, which uses marine-based ingredients alongside nourishing vitamins (including that play on words, Vitamin C) to freshen up the face.

Considering The Del's legacy as a health and vacation destination, this emphasis on the hotel's surroundings makes sense. After all, if you come to San Diego, you want to see, well, San Diego. And so, in 2007, the labyrinthine Spa at The Del began serving up what vacationers have sought since the hotel opened in 1888: The restorative powers of the ocean. With 21 treatment rooms, ranking in Travel + Leisure's top 20 spas in the world, a beachfront relaxation terrace and a temptingly elegant boutique, the Spa at The Del carries on that grand old tradition of insisting that a little decadence is good for the soul. And maybe even the body, too.

For more spa details and recommendations, visit www.sandiego.org.